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ABSTRACT

For professors of educational administration, a critical task is to design learning experiences that engage future administrators in an examination of their practice from a variety of perspectives. This challenge prompted the educational administration faculty at Eastern Michigan University to redesign its doctoral program in order to cross disciplinary lines, link theory and practice, and provide synthesizing experiences. This paper describes the development of the new doctoral program, which incorporated an interdisciplinary case-study-comprehensive qualifying examination. Now in its third cycle, the doctoral case-study approach to the comprehensive examination has resulted in a sharpened departmental focus, a deepened interpersonal understanding among faculty, the development of a collaborative learning community, the direct experience of the change process, and a total program transformation. Two critical areas currently being addressed include the infusion of case studies throughout the entire program and the development of criteria for case-study assessment and grading. (LMI)

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Using the Interdisciplinary Case Study
to
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Background

A major challenge facing professors of educational administration is the task of designing doctoral programs that prepare future school leaders and policy makers to respond to the challenges and needs of America's schools. Recent publications by organizations such as the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (1989), and by individuals such as Griffiths, Stout and Forsyth (1988), and Achilles (1989), stress the need for administrator preparation programs to develop graduates who have the requisite knowledge, abilities and skills to serve as new kinds of educational leaders.

New definitions of leadership include the ability to envision and build organizational cultures which are mastery-oriented for all, learning-oriented for continuous systemic improvement, and "other-oriented" in terms of authentic caring and regard. Scholars such as Thomas Sergiovanni (1993), Lynn Beck (1994), Bolman and Deal (1994), Senge (1992), Langer and Colton (1994) have expanded the

traditional emphasis on science and deductive leadership by focusing new attention on the spiritual and caring dimensions of leadership, moral and professional ideals, permanent questioning and learning, and the development of reflective professional judgment.

For professors of educational administration, a critical task is to design learning experiences that engage future administrators in an examination of their practice from a variety of perspectives, in the hope of integrating past experiences, new knowledge, personal beliefs and values in the construction of new meaning and understandings. It was this challenge that motivated the educational administration faculty at Eastern Michigan University to reflect upon the nature and design of their current program, with particular emphasis on the newly established doctoral program, now in its third year. Analysis of the related literature served as the basis for reform efforts. Furthering the process was feedback offered by the current students and graduates, advice and counsel offered by the doctoral program's Board of Advisors, a body of exemplary administrator practitioners from across the state, and ongoing intensive dialogue among all members of the faculty.

This process led to diagnosis of deficiencies in the existing doctoral program, and identification of possible areas of redesign. A key issue that emerged was the need to provide a summative, capstone experience which could lead all students to a holistic integration of all aspects of their program and all courses of study. Just as the world of practice presented problems of overlapping issues and complexity, so must the world of preparation approximate that reality. The challenge was to cross traditional course and

disciplinary lines, link theory and practice, and provide synthesizing experiences which sought to combine the technical, ethical and transformative dimensions of effective educational leadership. It was this challenge that led to the development of the comprehensive doctoral case study exam.

Initial Design of the Doctoral Comprehensive Qualifying Examination

In designing the structure and format of the doctoral comprehensive examination, faculty looked to the experiences of other institutions with mature doctoral programs in educational leadership. For them, the examination served as an assessment process by which doctoral students were called upon to demonstrate their degree of mastery of the programmatic knowledge base contained within the entire body of coursework completed.

The faculty agreed upon a modified format, and designed as their capstone experience the doctoral comprehensive qualifying examination to be given when doctoral students had completed all required coursework. Subject matter mastery of the major field of study (educational leadership) as well as of a cognate area would be assessed by means of written and oral examinations. The written portion of the examination would cover two days. During the first day all students would write on common questions related to theories of educational leadership, ethics and policy analysis and school/community relations. This part of the examination would be developed and read by the entire faculty acting as an educational leadership program doctoral examination committee. On the second day, students would select four out of six questions from the areas of

supervision, evaluation, and staff development; school finance; collective negotiations; human relations; curriculum and law, submitted by individual faculty members in their area of expertise. (This division of subject area derived from the unique history and organization of the department, which carried over into the new program of studies.) In addition, students would answer a question from their cognate area, developed and read by the involved faculty member(s). The two-hour oral examination was designed to permit in-depth discussion of any areas of the student's written examination by members of the doctoral student's committee.

This process was followed for the first two cohort groups of doctoral students. After these initial experiences with the examination, faculty began to have misgivings and concerns about the validity of the assessment process as it was then designed. Of particular note was the lack of common structure for each question submitted by faculty. Many questions lacked opportunities for students to engage in the application of knowledge or to engage in reflective thinking practices that were embedded in the department program philosophy. Further, since questions were submitted without faculty collaboration, scoring became vague for faculty readers who were unsure of what should constitute an appropriate response to a particular faculty member's question, resulting in wide scoring variance.

In addition to dissatisfaction expressed by faculty, doctoral students who took the comprehensive qualifying examination also expressed their concerns about the questions and exam format. Students felt that they had little opportunity to integrate their

responses across disciplinary lines since each question required a quick response (one to two hours) within the structure of the discipline represented by the question. The complete examination seemed disconnected, fragmented, and lacking a holistic view of the programmatic knowledge base of educational leadership.

A third and important source of constructive criticism came from the Department's K-12 Doctoral Program Advisory Committee. This committee, composed of exemplary administrator practitioners from public school districts across the state, had been meeting with department faculty throughout the year to assist in program design and modification. The charge to the Committee was to help make the doctoral program less traditional, more field-based, more closely linked between theory and practice, and more clearly focused upon real life leadership issues faced by contemporary school administrators. As members of the Committee reviewed the comprehensive qualifying examination, they concluded that its format was, in fact, in conflict with the Department's stated program goals. Accordingly, faculty met to explore replacement of the existing format with an alternate assessment design that would address the various concerns. The result was the development of the interdisciplinary case study doctoral comprehensive qualifying examination.

Case Studies and Professional Preparation

Case studies have long been used in various professional preparation programs, particularly law, business and medicine. Their virtue is that they serve as a vehicle by which a particular

situation or dilemma may be presented, complete with richly described events and characters. According to Lawrence, (1953),

A good case is the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor. A good case keeps the discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in real life situations. It is the anchor on academic flights of speculation. It is the record of complex situations that must be literally pulled apart and put together again before the situations can be understood.

cited in Cossom (1991).

For administrator preparation programs, cases offer an opportunity to examine and reflect upon a particular problem--its content, context, students, pedagogy, other characters, prior experiences, personal views and values, scripts--and to access and apply the professional knowledge base to interpret data and make decisions. The possible range of topics is virtually limitless--school mission, climate, organizational restructuring, educational reform efforts, evaluation and assessment, coordination of services with community agencies. . . Whatever the topic, a well written case presents students with a life-like problem in which they must link theory and practice in exercising their educational leadership responsibilities. Specifically, it calls upon students to study a situation carefully by observing, gathering information, analyzing and interpreting data, hypothesizing, and choosing a course of action. Furthermore, in imitation of life, effective cases do not present themselves in neatly compartmentalized divisions, with clearly identifiable self-contained issues. Rather, they are distinguished by their ambiguity and their openness to multiple interpretations and resolutions. The solutions sought depend on the problem-framing

process employed; the critical issue is often not the quest for the right answer, but the identification of the key question.

It was precisely these qualities which attracted faculty to an investigation of the case study as a vehicle for the doctoral qualifying comprehensive examination. Several faculty had prior experience with case studies, having used them in an informal, experimental manner in various courses. Their description of their experiences with case teaching affirmed the power of this approach and stimulated an extended discussion of the possible application of cases to the doctoral program. Specifically, cases provided an opportunity to engage all students in discussion of a situation/ problem about which all had the same background and factual information. Further, cases proved to be a highly effective teaching approach for they:

- serve to link theory and practice
- accord with the principles of adult learning theory
- derive directly from actual field-based situations, or are composites of multiple actual situations
- are particular and contextualized
- approximate real problems and dilemmas by their complexity and ambiguity
- provide opportunities for instructors to access students' thinking and decision-making processes
- call upon students to integrate past knowledge, experience and personal platform, in confronting a problem
- serve to stimulate multi-frame analysis, multi-question posing, and multi-solution design

Coincidental with the department's consideration of the possibility of this new approach to the comprehensive exam, the university offered, through its Faculty Center for Instructional Excellence, a series of workshops on case instruction, presented in conjunction with the Case Studies Project of the American Association for Higher Education. Several members of the department attended, obtaining rich new resources and sample materials, and, above all, access to a resident member of the university with considerable case study expertise.

The services of this new university colleague/resource person were called upon in formal workshop sessions designed specifically for the department. New understandings came to be shared by all, along with specific criteria of exemplary cases suggested in the AAHE Teaching Initiative materials, Cases About College Teaching and Learning. These provided the loosely structured framework within which discussion continued and actual casewriting proceeded. Our new guidelines were as follows:

- Good cases have appropriate surrounding material of richness and complexity
- Case writers need to address issues of authenticity/ truth, claims/authority
- Good cases have political credibility
- Cases should be windows on the wisdom of practice
- Good cases have intellectual and emotional dimensions
- Good cases have richness and complexity

- Good cases are not too long...but long enough to capture the complexity and the important, deeper issues of teaching and learning

Redesigning the Doctoral Comprehensive Qualifying Examination

The combination of dissatisfaction with what was, and opportunity for formal consideration of what might be led to the decision to take the first steps, to redesign the doctoral exam. The decision had been made...now what?

Our tentative exploratory initial discussions led to our realization that we had to agree on the subject matter of the case-- the particular problem or dilemma to be presented. Soon, we realized that other steps had to precede this decision; specifically, we had to become clear and explicit with each other about the essential knowledge and skills we wished students to demonstrate, in all subject areas/domains of the entire knowledge base. This required that each individual faculty make explicit to colleagues the content/critical learnings/and knowledge base of the particular subject area for which s/he had responsibility.

Through this process, what had been hidden became explicit. The "classroom door was opened" (Shulman, 1993), and new conversation flowed about content and pedagogy, about teaching and learning, about making connections and making meaning. For in order to develop the doctoral comprehensive case study exam, we had to make clear to all the cognitive foundation on which the case study was to be built, and assure that critical content from all areas of the program was included in an integrated, holistic way.

The case writing process unfolded through a series of sequential decisions, each building on the one before. Once critical learnings in each subject area had been explicated by all faculty, the search began for an appropriate core problem/dilemma. Several alternatives were considered, all reviewed within the guidelines of the framework described above. Faculty sought a situation or combination of situations that presented the greatest opportunity to assess student knowledge and expertise, analytic and reflective thinking, problem-solving skills, application of theory to problems of practice, and capacity for leadership in the given scenario.

Following initial brainstorming sessions to determine elements of content, individual faculty members assumed responsibility to develop a section of the case and refine it accordingly. Subsequent working sessions were held to review and critique the work, reiterate as needed, share tasks, and develop/acquire accompanying materials. After multiple departmental writing and review sessions, we were ready for a preliminary draft of our collective efforts. This was critiqued, rewritten, recritiqued, and rewritten... Once the final draft of the case was completed and approved, specific student directions were enunciated, and the case was ready to go.

Impact of the Doctoral Comprehensive Qualifying Case Study Exam

Now in its third cycle, the doctoral case study approach to the comprehensive exam has had enormous impact on the department, affecting course design, planning and instruction not only in all phases of the doctoral program, but in all programs in the department. Extensive individual and group interviews with

members of the department have revealed five major areas in which both the doctoral program, and the department as a whole have been transformed.

a. Sharpened departmental focus

Reexamination of the doctoral comprehensive qualifying exam served as a catalyst to consideration of deeper issues relating to the entire program. Foundation questions were revisited: what was the purpose of the program; what did our multiple audiences have to say about our effectiveness; how could research inform our work; how could new linkages be built across subject matter to achieve essential total program integration? Focus on the doctoral exam as a kind of ultimate outcomes assessment stimulated new levels of faculty conversation, reflection, problem solving, collaboration and ownership. The shared process of clarified departmental focus served to enhance both personal/professional growth and departmental power.

b. Deepening of inter-personal understanding

The process of professional sharing around issues of course content, design and pedagogy deepened the personal knowledge and understanding of their colleagues by all members of the department. Each faculty member was given an opportunity to explicate the content, importance, relevance of his/her subject area as it connected to the whole schema of doctoral-level administrator preparation. No longer was the content just a few lines in a graduate catalog or a program description. Expanded awareness of individual interests and expertise led to deeper understanding and new linkages not only

with regard to program content, but to individual faculty. The result was new dimensions of regard, caring, relationship and support.

c. Building a collaborative learning community

The process of writing the comprehensive case study served as an instrument for extended departmental conversation and community building. The traditional norms of professorial individualism and isolation came to be replaced with a new model of collegial interconnection. Since all courses were now to be connected holistically in one summative assessment experience, and since the modality of the assessment device had to be infused into all levels and courses of the program in order to adequately prepare students, faculty had to operate at deeper levels of professional collegiality. Individual fields of discipline and specialization had to be woven into a coherent, holistic program built on shared values and ideals. The outcome was not just a new exam, but a new departmental sense of community, articulating a unifying sense of shared purpose and focus, and merging the strengths and contributions of both individualism and collegiality.

d. Direct experience of change process

At both the personal and program/total system levels, faculty experienced the process of change. Reconsideration of the issue of the doctoral exam provided an opportunity for faculty to articulate to each other their shared desire to become less traditional. Before their colleagues, they expressed their own dissatisfactions and aspirations for the program, drew upon the feedback from their former students and the Advisory Committee members, took guidance from the instruction afforded by their own university's

resources, and confirmed their commitment to seek new ways of program assessment through thoughtful innovation and experimentation. There was no going back...there would be change.

e. Total program transformation

As may now be apparent, the process of moving to an interdisciplinary doctoral comprehensive case study qualifying examination set in motion a process whereby all aspects of the doctoral program and of the department as a whole were impacted. As never before, program and course design, teaching methods and assessment models were reviewed with new emphasis on total program integration, and ongoing total faculty collaboration.

Unfinished Business

The faculty is now engaged in addressing two critical areas related to the changes introduced:

- development and infusion of case studies throughout the entire program
- criteria for case study assessment and grading

The faculty has begun the process of identifying the current use of case study methodology in individual coursework and developing and supplementing their continued and/or expanded use. Plans have been made for ongoing total faculty development in case writing, teaching and assessment. One member of the faculty attended, as departmental representative, the 1994 AAHE National Institute on Case Writing and Reflective Practice. New materials have been obtained and new resource persons identified for additional faculty development. The goal is to deepen faculty

understanding, knowledge and skills with all aspects of case study teaching: preparation, instruction and assessment. No doubt, this approach to comprehensive doctoral student assessment will continue to evolve. Whether the future will hold a more refined and developed model of a case study exam, or some other alternative, the focus will be on shaping learning and assessment experiences that can meet the challenge faced by all professors of educational administration--to prepare effective future leaders to meet the challenges and needs of America's schools.

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